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## Towards cross-cultural adaptation of international students: A case study of Chinese students in Finland

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### ABSTRACT

Globalization is rapidly becoming an integral part of people's lives and this forces people to be confronted by different cultures, societies and living environments. This study aims to reveal the implications of this situation people traveling abroad are challenged by multiple aspects. This study aims at answering: How do Chinese students adapt to life & study in Kuopio in Finland? The purpose of the research is to find out the outstanding challenges and coping strategies of Chinese students study in a new cultural environment. To achieve this goal, this study is undertaken within the context of Savonia University of Applied Sciences at Kuopio in Finland. It attempts to investigate the unique academic and cultural experiences of the Chinese students, the perception of their own abilities, as well as their adaptation processes to a new environment. A qualitative research method is used in this study whilst the data-collecting techniques include questionnaires and individual interviews tracked both the common and unique experiences of with Chinese students. Data analysis has indicated several factors which have influenced their immersion into the Finnish campus life. While coping with the stress of culture shock and the ongoing challenge of living in Finland, the Chinese students select coping strategies, use of social support, and shifting views of self.

### KEYWORDS

Cross-cultural adaptation; Intercultural communication competence; Culture shock; Adaptation strategies.



## INTRODUCTION

Today, we are living in a multicultural society within a global village. People are faced with cultural differences and cultural challenges everywhere around us, especially in education and its relationship with globalization. Changes are on multiple aspects, such as living environments, socio-political and economic structures that are part of our everyday. People travelling abroad are challenged in all these areas and how they respond depends on their abilities to adapt to new cultures. For students going abroad to study, these challenges are even more evident. In addition to being familiar with the host country's aspects of communication, they need to be aware of an entirely new cultural environment. Researchers have been concerned with the question of how people understand each other when they do not share a common cultural, linguistic and socio-political background. How to manage culture stress or cultural shock and improve intercultural communication skills are crucial issues in intercultural competencies. Consequently, to study how to develop students' intercultural communication competence has become an interesting and challenging task in education.

Adaptation is the result of an individuals' acculturation process to reach the balance between strangers and their new surroundings. The ability to adapt to a new culture is the heart of ICC (intercultural communication competence). The issues of ICC have been discussed in academic publications among researchers of various fields for the last 50 years. ICC has been approached from various perspectives. Collier<sup>[7]</sup> identified four major approaches in ICC research: ethnographical aspect of speaking, cross-cultural attitudes, behavioral skills and cultural identity<sup>[21]</sup>. Many studies have also been made on the environmental and psychological demands of overseas sojourners, and acculturation stress and psychological responses to an unfamiliar culture<sup>[13]</sup>.

Adaptation is fundamental to human existence. In Ruben's study, living systems act instinctively to meet the challenges or threats and to restore balance and harmony<sup>[19]</sup>. Every new experience, particularly the drastic and disorienting ones that sojourners encounter in a new environment, leads to new learning and growth. The unique character of the human mind is the capacity to face challenges and acquire new knowledge and insights. Situations of cross-cultural adaptation bring profound and encircling challenges to sojourners as they soon realize that many of their previously taken-for-granted assumptions and life tools, for instance, language and social norms are no longer relevant or appropriate<sup>[13]</sup>.

Adaptation is a process where individuals in cross-cultural communication situations change their communicative behavior in order to diminish misunderstandings with the culturally different other. The nature of change is also described by Bennett<sup>[2]</sup>, who defines adaptation as empathy, where a person temporarily changes his world view to process reality. In Berry's<sup>[3,4]</sup> study, adaptation is seen as the result of an individuals' acculturation process. People adapt and change, as they want to reach the balance between themselves and their new surrounding. In ICC literature, the long term adaptation has been mostly studied by social psychologists and only recently by researchers of communication<sup>[13]</sup>. ICC tries to describe the necessary ICC for short term settlers<sup>[13]</sup>.

Kim<sup>[13]</sup> points out cross cultural adaptation has been studied seriously since the beginning of the 20th century. One type of cross cultural adaptation literature describes mode of cross adaptation<sup>[1,17,25]</sup>. Cross cultural adaptation refers to how sojourner chooses to cope with cultural changes.

Kim<sup>[13]</sup> presents a model of intercultural communication competence grounded on the general system's notion of adaptability or capability of an individual's internal psychic system to alter its existing attributes and structures to accommodate the demands of the environment. Kim uses the term intercultural adaptation broadly to serve as a concept that represents various other terms such as assimilation, acculturation, integration and adjustment. She states that adaptability means the individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, in order to learn and accommodate some of the new ones, and to creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural differences or unfamiliarity, inter-group posture and the accompanying stress. This ability to adapt to a new culture is the heart of intercultural communication competence<sup>[12]</sup>. There are three dimensions that relate to the concept of adaptability. The first is the cognitive dimension which refers to individuals'

interpretive mechanisms or structures employed in assigning meaning to verbal and nonverbal messages<sup>[24]</sup>. The second is the affective dimension which is concerned with the individuals' motivations and attitudes relevant to intercultural communication. Intercultural encounters, the affective dimension of competence, means a readiness to accommodate intercultural challenges<sup>[12]</sup>, and a tolerance for ambiguity and anxiety while being faced with intercultural situations that are aspects of the affective dimension. The third is the operational or behavioral dimension, which is concerned with how individuals interact in intercultural communication contexts.

Kim's cross-cultural adaptation model focuses on host communication competence. In this model host communication competence is defined as: "the capacity to receive and process information (decoding) and to design and enact plans to initiate messages or respond to others (encoding) appropriately and effectively in accordance with the host communication system"<sup>[14]</sup>.

Kim states that important host communication competence elements are cognitive (knowledge of host communication system, cultural understanding, cognitive complexity), affective (adaptation motivation, aesthetic co-orientation) and operational (technical skills, synchrony, resourcefulness)<sup>[13]</sup>. The adaptive personality has the following characteristics: openness (flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity), personality strength (risk taking, hardness, persistency, and self-control), positiveness<sup>[13]</sup>.

In the model of cross-cultural adaptation, the practice of interpersonal communication and mass communication between sojourners and the target culture is seen to affect host communication competence. The awareness of the host cultural practices in wide-ranging areas of everyday life, both directly and indirectly, was seen as important<sup>[13]</sup>. The three external inter-effecting influences to host communication competence are predisposition, environment and intercultural transformation. Firstly, predisposition is innate and it covers personal characteristics. It can also be considered as a blueprint, as each individual has different background sources. It includes preparedness, how great is the similarity or difference among locals, degree of adaptive personality, openness, tolerance for ambiguity, and strength of personality<sup>[13]</sup>.

The perspective of the environmental aspect stresses the receptivity of a host culture and how much as an ethnic group, they are open to strangers. Intercultural transformation is seen as an unconscious development after various learning interactions in the host culture<sup>[13]</sup>.

Ward and colleagues research individuals who travel voluntarily to a new culture, they have attempted to provide a theoretical framework for synthesis of theory and research on cross-cultural transition and adaptation. Two fundamental types of sojourner adjustment have been identified, associated with a stress and coping framework refers to psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction in new cultural context. Secondly referred to as sociocultural adaptation, is related to the ability to "fit in" or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture. In attempts to construct predictive models of cross-cultural adaptation through multiple regression analyses, Ward and colleagues have found that psychological adjustment, operationalized in terms of mood disturbance, is strongly influenced by personality, life changes, and support variables. They have preciously argued that psychological adjustment is best understood within a stress and coping framework while sociocultural adaptation is more appropriately situated within the culture learning tradition.

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to how a sojourner chooses to cope with cultural changes<sup>[17,25]</sup>. Studies concerning what factors influence the adaptation process have been done on different group of international students. A range of predictor variables are identified to influence the duration and intensity of the adaptation process: Communication skills (language skills, nonverbal communication skills, interaction with host members); Personality factors (patience, empathy and flexibility); demographic factors (gender, age, age at the time of resettlement, socioeconomic status); culture factors (cultural similarity/ distance, host environment receptivity); reason motivation for transition; the degree of predeparture preparation; social support network<sup>[8,10,13]</sup>.

## THE PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The purpose of this study is to examine how Chinese students attending Savonia University of Applied Sciences adapted to the new environment in Kuopio, in order to identify areas of importance that would help them to adapt to Finland better. This study uses Kim's cross-cultural adaptation model, which focuses on host communication competence<sup>[13]</sup>. The Intercultural communication competence theory base is written especially from A Profile of the Intercultural Effective Persons by Canadian Foreign Service institute<sup>[23]</sup>.

This study aims at answering the following question:

How do Chinese students adapt to life & study in Kuopio, Finland?

This question covers two major aspects:

1. What are the attitudes of Chinese students towards the cultural differences between China and Finland? What are the factors influencing their adaptation to University of Finland?
2. What strategies have these students adopted to the new cultural environment?

“Increased internationalization in the economic, political and social arenas has led to greater interpersonal cross-cultural contact”<sup>[5]</sup>. There are countless opportunities for individuals to work and live in a culture different from their native culture. It is not a dream that people live in this country for one year and move to another country next year. People are seeking to study or be trained abroad to gain intercultural understanding, to achieve individual academic goals, or to obtain personal independence and this can be accomplished by working, living and studying in the global village without any national boundaries. A crucial issue for Chinese is how they adapt to new environments which are different from their own, finding value in both which increases motivation and desire to learn better, as well as being able to use the knowledge to communicate appropriately across two or more cultures. Individuals must be able to adapt in a new culture to survive the effect of globalization and understanding how to adapt can increase the chances of success. Kim points out that ‘adaptation’ occurs through the communication interface between the stranger and the host milieu, just as the natives acquire their capacity to function in their society through communicative interactions throughout their lives. Intercultural competence should be independent of success, centered within individuals as a measure of their capabilities.

This phenomenon led the researcher to conduct the investigation which aims to study Chinese students’ affective and behavioral dimensions of intercultural communication competence whilst investigating the participants’ opinions and satisfaction with their communication abilities in a new cultural environment. It will also explore some functional strategies for teachers to use in their daily work. Foreign language teaching has a role to play in this multicultural world, as it trains students to communicate appropriately between people across two or more cultures. Language must be taught alongside intercultural skills and both aspects need to be considered when assessing a student for an overseas assignment. So from this perspective, this research has great significance.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This section states the research questionnaire, outlines the research procedures and describes the participants in the study. Throughout this process the researcher has aimed at openness and honesty towards the subject examined and people interviewed. The purpose has been to analyze the research material objectively and to show the relation between theoretical material and empirical research. By comparing the questionnaires and analyzing the interviews, it is expected to find how the Chinese students adjusted to and reached a balance in their new surroundings. From their comments and experiences, conclusions will be drawn which will give guidelines to recognize and anticipate factors impeding and facilitating students’ success in intercultural exchanges.

### Research instruments

The purpose of this study is to find out how Chinese students adapt to Kuopio in Finland and especially how to understand their adaptation process and experience. The two research instruments were designed in order to answer the research questions. The research data was collected through

personal questionnaires and interviews. This study has adopted the common questionnaire form designed according to relevant theories, to ascertain Chinese students' affective and behavior. The form was distributed to Chinese students to tick.

### **Affective dimension**

The items concerned students' attitudes, including willingness and challenges regarding the differences between the native and host environments. Students were asked to rate on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) their attitudes about the friendliness of the university (University offers a friendly educational environment), as well as finding the factors influencing their adaptation (YOU feel you have big challenges when you stay in Kuopio). The items were combined to produce an overall rating of this dimension.

### **Behavioral dimension**

The students' perception of their own abilities to be flexible in an intercultural communication situation were assessed. They were asked to rate their skill in interacting with Finnish students. These items were combined to produce an overall rating of their perceptions of their flexibility and their language proficiency in the behavioral dimension.

### **Strategies of adaptation**

The students were asked to rate their strategies of adaptation and measure their overall adjustment to Finnish life, (Did you overall adjustment to Finnish life), also to analyze and understand their adaptation experience.

Interview is one qualitative technique that has been successfully used in many fields. It is a personal information exchange activity. Interviews can be used both to obtain a subjective description of the interviewee's own experiences and to investigate specific questions of interest to the researcher. The present study uses interviews to examine the research questions. The interviews remained open-ended and conversational, but the interview followed a certain set of questions. The open-ended questions allowed the interviewees to freely express their views and opinions and created a relatively varied and many-sided description of the reality and individual experiences. Eight students were interviewed, and each interview lasts around 30-40 minutes.

The goals of the interviews were to obtain a detailed description on their real life experiences, to discover how they were motivated to reach a live able equilibrium in their new surroundings, balancing the two cultures, their own and that of the host country. Factors impeding and facilitating the students' success in the intercultural exchange were recognized.

### **Participants**

Sixteen Chinese students were involved in this study. Others could not be contacted due to incomplete or outdated address and telephone information. Of those who participated, nine were male and seven female. They were from 5 cities in China, including Wuhan, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Anhui, big cities in the southern part of China. The participants were majoring in International Marketing Management, Information Technology, Engineering Information Technology and Tourism fields. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 years with a mean of 19.4 years old. Twelve students had just graduated from high school in China and their university entrance exam scores in China ranged from 350 to 500. They had lived in Kuopio from 2 months to 3 years with a mean of 9 months. There were not many Chinese living in Kuopio at that time. For this reason, there was not much psychological distance during the interview. Most of the time, the atmosphere was relaxed and trusting.

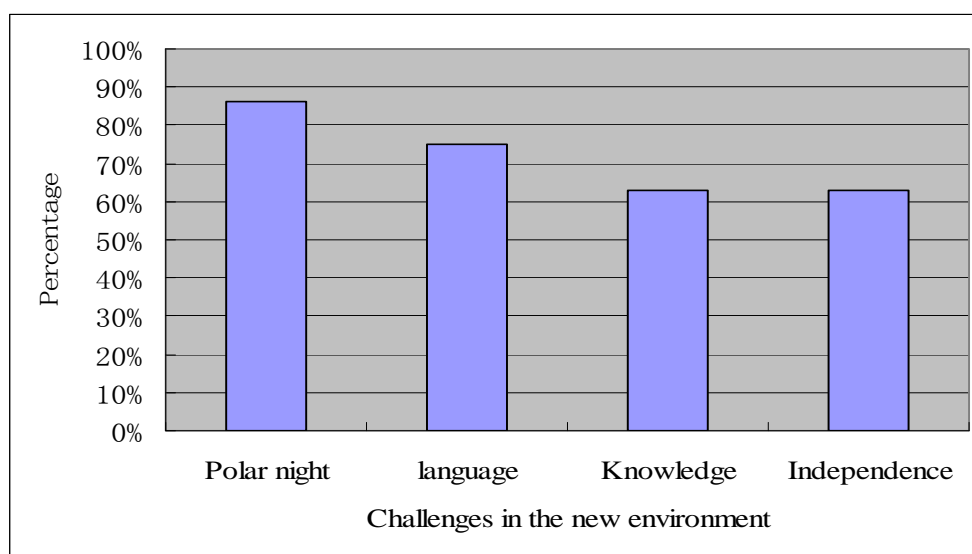
## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the factors influencing the Chinese students' adaptation as well as to analyze and understand their adaptation experience. The questionnaire contained 26 items in four parts.

Part One with items 1-6 was designed to state the student's personal profile. Part Two with items 7-10 was designed to state the student's attitude towards differences in the native and host environment. Part Three with items 11-15 was designed to state the student's perception of their own abilities to be flexible in the host environment. Part Four with items 16-26 was designed to state the measure of their overall adjustment into Finnish life.

Data analysis has indicated many findings which have influenced their immersion into the Finnish campus life. These are summarized as follows: Most of the Chinese students have a strong positive attitude and a willingness to learn and adapt to a new environment. Initially they struggled with the obvious cultural differences, but eventually came to experience a balance between the two cultures.

However, the Chinese students reported that they faced challenges when they stayed in Kuopio. These challenges included: the lack of preparation for the long polar night and the impact it had on their emotions and feelings; the lack of language proficiency; the lack of opportunity to freely interact with Finnish students; the lack of cultural knowledge and the lack of abilities to live independently.



**Figure 1 : Challenges in the environment**

These factors influenced their adaptation to university life. While coping with the stress of culture shock and the ongoing challenge of living in Finland, the Chinese students chose many effective strategies to adapt. They developed leisure activities that are unique to the polar climate. They visited different parts of the country. They built new relationships, and won the confidence and trust from Finnish friends or others. They developed their language skills by frequently interacting with Finnish students, by experiencing Finnish culture, participating in intercultural communication courses, as well as developing mutual understanding through various means and channels. These strategies of adaptation helped to develop their empathy, flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, capability, confidence, language proficiency and independence. Thus they were able to maintain their own cultural identity and embrace their host culture, enjoying the best of both worlds.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to examine how the Chinese students at Savonia University of Applied Sciences have adapted to their new environment in Kuopio. The important aspects related to the student's unique experience in Finland have been identified, which cover the Chinese students' understanding of their own abilities, the significant adjustment needed to cope with the polar night in the polar culture, the students' language proficiency, their knowledge of the host country, and their skills for

surviving independently. These factors all have influenced their immersion into the Finnish campus life. The paper also analyzes their cultural adaptation and how that has influenced their perceptions and behaviors. This study also aims to assess what adaptation strategies have been applied to the new environment by the Chinese students. It also assesses the adaptation processes and individual experiences of the students.

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